

**Phil 104, October 15, 2010**  
**Hume, *Treatise*, III:iii:1–2**

**What explains moral judgment?**

Judgments that an action or character is virtuous or vicious are *not* conclusions of reason, but instead result from certain feelings that result, in turn, from thinking about those actions or characters. “An action, or sentiment, or character is virtuous or vicious; why? because its view causes a pleasure or uneasiness of a particular kind.”

*But not every feeling of pleasure or uneasiness is a moral judgment*

“’Tis only when a character is considered in general, without reference to our particular interest, that it causes such a feeling or sentiment, as denominates it morally good or evil” (472).

*How is this supposed to work?*

What is it about certain kinds of characters that produce these sensations in us? After all, these sentiments don’t fire off at random. There is something about Hitler and Nero that produces one kind of sentiment, and something else about Gandhi and Martin Luther King that produces another kind of sentiment. How does this work?

*Sympathy:*

- We cannot actually perceive the passions of others.
- We can only directly perceive the causes or effects of the passions of others.
- When we do so, we readily form an idea, or representation, of those passions.
- This idea then produces a passion in us of the same type: a version, more or less vivid, of what others feel.
- Sympathy is this tendency.

*Ordinary usage:* I sympathize with your pain when I wish, for your sake, that you didn’t feel it.

*Hume’s usage:* I sympathize with your pain when your pain causes me to feel a pain of the same kind.

*First approximation:*

S’s judging a person’s character trait X to be virtuous arises from:  
S’s sympathizing with those for whom X is useful or agreeable.

Because of our sympathy, qualities that produce pleasure in others (that are useful or agreeable) tend to produce similar pleasures in us.

*First objection to explaining moral evaluation in terms of sympathy:*

- (i) Sympathy is variable. We sympathize more with people closer to us than with people farther away, either in our affections, or in place, or in time,
- (ii) Therefore, if our moral judgments were based on sympathy, our moral judgments would manifest the same variability.
- (iii) But our moral judgments do not manifest the same variability.
- (iv) Therefore, our moral judgments are not based on sympathy.

*Hume's reply:*

We do not make moral judgments simply from our own point of view, but rather from a “steady and general” point of view:

- “steady” in the sense that it does not change over time, and
- “general” in the sense that it takes everyone’s interests into account.

We could neither converse intelligibly with other people, nor have consistent thoughts over time, about moral matters if we did not ascend to this common point of view.

*Second objection to explaining moral evaluation in terms of sympathy:*

- (i) When a character that, in normal circumstances, would be useful or agreeable to other is, due to abnormal circumstances, less useful or agreeable, we have less to sympathize with.
- (ii) Therefore, if our moral judgments were based on sympathy, our moral judgments would vary in this way.
- (iii) But our moral judgments do not vary in this way. “Virtue in rags is still virtue.”
- (iv) Therefore, our moral judgments are not based on sympathy.

*Hume's reply:*

When we have experienced the “constant conjunction” of A’s followed by B’s, our “imagination” anticipates a B when it experiences an A. Thus, when we experience a character that is usually useful or agreeable, we automatically anticipate that it will be useful or agreeable in the present circumstances and, regardless of whether the present circumstances permit it to be useful or agreeable, respond with a sentiment of approval.

*Hume's theory:*

S’s judging a person’s character trait X to be virtuous arises from:

S’s recognition that S *would* sympathize with the people for whom X would be useful or agreeable,

if (i) S adopted a *steady and general point of view* and

if (ii) X *were to have its usual effects*.

*How is moral evaluation related to moral motivation?*

- Hume may have shown us why we approve of certain traits of character, why we regard them as virtues.
- But this does not yet explain why, as individuals, we seek to develop and exercise those virtues.

### **Morality approves of itself**

- We have seen Hume’s explanation *why* we make the moral judgments that we do.
- Is that how we *ought* to make moral judgments?
- Does Hume think that it makes sense to ask this question?
- Yes, in a way: We can ask whether our moral sense approves or disapproves of itself.
- And it turns out that it approves of itself:

All lovers of virtue (and such we all are in speculation, however we may degenerate in practice) must certainly be pleas'd to see moral distinctions deriv'd from so noble a source, which gives us a just notion both of the *generosity* and *capacity* of human nature... But this sense must certainly acquire a new force, when reflecting on itself, it approves of those principles, from whence it is deriv'd, and finds nothing but what is great and good in its origin... According to [the system of those who account for that sense by an extensive sympathy with mankind], not only virtue must be approv'd of, but also the sense of virtue: And not only that sense, but also the principle from which it is deriv'd. So that nothing is presented on any side, but what is laudable and good (619).

- In other words, Hume argues, when we come to see *why* we make the judgments about good and bad that we do, we will judge that it is a *good* way to go about making judgments about what is good and bad. Of course, this judgment will *come from* the very capacity that is being explained. That is, our capacity for approval will approve of itself. It will see that it lives up to its own standards. This is a descriptive claim: a prediction about what will happen when moral judgment judges itself. We can call this “reflective stability.” (John Rawls’s phrase, not Hume’s.) When our moral nature “reflects” on itself, it is “stable,” i.e., finds nothing in need of change.
- “Of course, our capacity for moral judgment will approve of itself,” one might think. After all, our capacity for moral judgment defines the test of goodness, so how could it fail to pass its own test?
- Well, Nietzsche thinks that morality *fails* its own test. When we understand why we make the moral judgments we do, Nietzsche thinks, we will be appalled at the explanation: morality is just a deformed expression of the will to power, the way the weak and reactive exert control over the strong and creative. When our capacity for moral judgment looks itself in the mirror, it must hate itself.
- Where Hume finds reflective stability, Nietzsche finds reflective *instability*.

### Review Questions:

1. If I sympathize with your pain in Hume’s usage, does it follow that I sympathize with your pain in the ordinary usage? (For these usages, see above.)
2. For many years, Nelson Mandela was imprisoned on Robben Island, which prevented him from producing pleasure in (many) others. So why, according to Hume, did people judge him to be virtuous during this time?
3. Suppose a psychotherapist convinces you that you are moral only because, deep down, you want your parents to love you more than your siblings. Would your moral character be “reflectively stable”?